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RESEARCHING WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS: AN INTRODUCTION TO FEMCIT AND SISTERHOOD AND AFTER

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Researching Women's Movements: FEMCIT and Sisterhood and After

edited by

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Researching Women's Movements:

an introduction to FEMCIT and Sisterhood and After

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Women's movements constantly innovate in response to changing social and political circumstances, yet they pose strikingly consistent questions for those who wish to study them. What methods are the most effective, and the most ethical, for capturing their nature, flavour and effects? How should we understand relationships between women's movement activists of different classes, ethnicities, religions, sexualities, or more broadly, the many structural, locational and cultural differences between women and within gender that affect women's organizing and feminist politics? How do place, space and nation define, enable and condition women's movements? And how do we know what influence movements have really had? This "special cluster" of papers grew out of two research projects' attempts to find answers to those troubling questions, and to share practical "solutions" to them.

FEMCIT is a large scale, European Commission-funded project, carrying out research across 13 European countries and involving 9 universities. *Sisterhood and After: The Women's Liberation Oral History Project* is a comparatively small oral history project, funded by the

Leverhulme Trust and partnered between the University of Sussex, the British Library and the Women's Library in the UK. Despite the differences of scale and aims between the two projects, they have much in common. Both have used biographical research methods, though one narrative and the other life story in orientation. Both have also taken steps to understand difference and diversity within women's movements, and to recognize the importance of locality and political geography. Finally, both have wanted to understand the impact of the movements we are trying to analyse and record.

This special cluster begins with a short introduction to each project followed by capsule essays by project members which address each of these important issues in turn. It will be evident that our experiences and answers are very different, for the two projects developed entirely independently and members only met once.¹ However, we hope that you will share the pleasure we had in discovering each other, and read each cluster as two alternative approaches. Further, in discussing the anatomy and pros and cons of each research design, we aim to contribute to a shared toolkit with the many others who are also researching women's movements as they change and diversify.

The FEMCIT Project

In 2005 a group of feminist social researchers – sociologists, political scientists, historians, and anthropologists – from across Europe came together to respond to a call by the European Commission for social scientific research on “citizens and governance”.² From various positions of engagement with feminist scholarship and activism, we saw this as an opportunity to do a large scale piece of cross-national research on the difference that women's movements have made, politically, socially and culturally. Strategically mobilizing,

and simultaneously problematizing and interrogating the language of citizenship that has been so central to the European project of governance in recent years, we constructed a research project to explore the ways in which women's movements, in all their variety and complexity, might or might not have contributed to the transformation of citizenship over the past forty years, in the changing multicultural contexts of Europe.

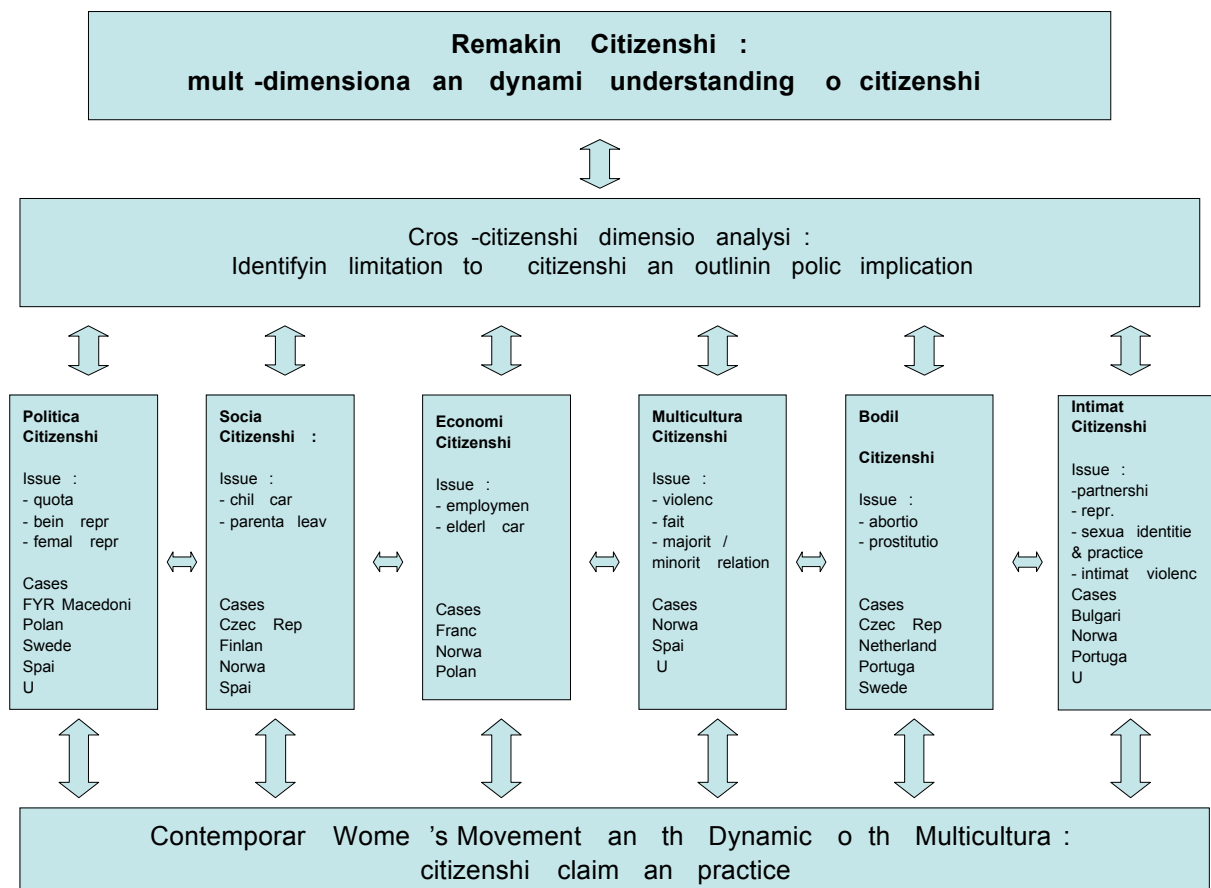
The “Gendered Citizenship in Multicultural Europe: impact of contemporary women's movements” project – FEMCIT for short – asked a big, macro-level question about *the impact of women's movements*: how have post 1960s women's movements re-made citizenship, in an increasingly multicultural and diverse Europe? We sought to answer this question through a series of case studies that addressed gendered citizenship in terms of state practice, at national and transnational level, and in terms of collective action within civil society (above all in women's organisations and groups), and everyday life and cultures. FEMCIT worked with an expanded, feminist-inspired conceptualization of citizenship that incorporated the central fields of struggle of women's movements over the past 40 years, investigating six interrelated “dimensions” of citizenship – political, social, economic, multicultural, bodily and intimate citizenship (see Figure 1).

As shown in Figure 1 below, each dimension of citizenship was addressed by a “work package” that addressed particular issues that have been the subject of women's movement claims-making. So, the *political citizenship* work package addressed the question of the formal political representation of women and members of minoritized groups, with sub-projects on gender and ethnic quotas, on gendered and racialized experiences of “being represented” (or not), and on the experience of being a woman member of an elective assembly. The *social citizenship* work package focused on women's movements' claims

around child care – including the tension within women’s movements between those advocating the public provision of day care and those seeking home care allowances – and claims around parental leave, and the issue of men’s involvement in raising children. The *economic citizenship* work package explored the influence of second wave women’s movements on normative assumptions, practices and policies related to women’s employment, focusing particularly on the growing sector of elder care, which is a highly gendered and racialized sphere of employment. The *multicultural citizenship* work package was concerned with the relationship between feminism, ethnic identity and religion. It had three sub-projects: one that examined the relations between majoritized and minoritized organisations within contemporary women’s movements, focusing particularly on those that are working around violence against women; another that explored the citizenship experiences and practices of Christian and Muslim women, and their relationship with feminism; and a third sub-project that researched the meanings of “citizenship” for women’s movement activists. The work package on *bodily citizenship* addressed the question of feminist body politics through case studies of the issues of abortion and prostitution, tracing feminist interventions and debates around these issues and their impact on policy and the political process. The *intimate citizenship* work package addressed the impact of women’s movements on intimate citizenship and personal life, mapping first the claims and demands of women’s movements, and other movements for gender and sexual equality, around intimate life, then analysing changes in intimate citizenship law and policy over the past forty years, and finally researching everyday experiences of intimate citizenship, with a particular focus on partnership, reproductive rights and parenting, sexual identities and practices and intimate violence. In the seventh work package we carried out our integrative work, bringing together the findings from the six citizenship dimensions to try to develop an overarching understanding of the impacts and legacies of contemporary women’s movements for

gendered citizenship, and conducting a number of further cross-citizenship dimension research projects on, for example, minoritized and immigrant women's organizations, and gender mainstreaming.

Figure 1: The FEMCIT Project



Each of FEMCIT's work packages focused on a selection of countries, mostly chosen according to a "most different" comparative research design, based on their differing welfare and gender regimes, or political/ religious histories, but also selected pragmatically, according to the national location, expertise and linguistic competence of key partners in the project.³ The work packages used a variety of research methods, including biographical

narrative interviews, individual and focus group interviews with activists, experts and key informants, survey questionnaires, participant observation, policy mapping, primary analysis of policy and movement texts, and secondary analysis of statistical data.

In trying to answer our central research question, we have had to recognize that isolating the influence and effects of women's movements is a complex, if not impossible task. This has meant setting our inquiry within the context of theoretical discussions about a number of processes of social change that have also contributed to the transformation of gendered citizenship in Europe. In particular, we have had to consider the role of processes of individualization and de-traditionalization, of democratization – the end of right wing dictatorships and the fall of communism, the Europeanization processes enacted by transnational political and legal institutions (such as the European Union, the Council of Europe) and social movement actors/ organizations (such as the European Social Forum and the European Women's Lobby), the globalizing forces of world markets and institutions, processes of post-colonialization, and the intensification of mobility and migration, and the related transformation of welfare states.

Alongside the empirical and theoretical exploration of the relationships between women's movements, gendered citizenship and the multicultural, FEMCIT has had a normative and political agenda: to engage in a process of imaging what full, gender-fair, liberatory citizenship in Europe might be, and to channel our ideas into the policy process through engagement with women's organizations, and European and national level policy-makers. One outcome of this agenda was the production of *The FEMCIT Manifesto for Multi-Dimensional Citizenship*, a collectively written document in which we present some of the most pressing claims and demands of women's movements in Europe across our six

dimensions of citizenship.⁴ We hope that the FEMCIT Manifesto will inspire debate in political groups and parties, amongst policy-makers and practitioners, within groups of friends, and between researchers – in other words, that it is part of the movements we have been researching.

Sisterhood and After: The Women's Liberation Oral History Project

The Women's Liberation Movement Oral History Project – Sisterhood and After (SAA) – grew out of the determination of a group of feminist activists and historians who had been at the centre of the British movement in the 1970s that the activism of their generation not be forgotten. In combination with a 30-something curator-researcher in the British Library's social science department, and a 40-something academic at the University of Sussex, this resulted in a grant from the Leverhulme Trust in 2010 for a three year project, involving the capture of fifty life history interviews with core activists across the UK, the making of ten related short films, as well as the interpretation of the interviews.⁵

The primary aim of the project is to create a permanent multimedia archive in a beautiful and powerful library where subsequent generations can discover the work of the movement pioneers of the 1960s-80s. An important element of this aim is to help foster the growth of feminist documentary archives as well. We are therefore also partnered with The Women's Library, Britain's largest feminist archive and public research space, which will use the project's momentum to winkle out more papers, letters, diaries, badges and banners from older campaigners, as well as draw on the oral history for its exhibitions and schools programme. The project builds on The Library's 2008-09 Women's Liberation Movement

Research Network, whose facilitator conducted “witness workshops” across the UK, and surveyed existing archival holdings in many other feminist collections in Britain.

In this way, SAA is both more and less than a conventional academic research project, attempting to speak to many publics at once. In this we build on a strong tradition of feminist historiography. Feminists launched community archives and history workshops as far back as the 1920s and women’s studies has, by definition, been action-oriented, defined by its own terms of political impact as much as intellectual discovery. We see ourselves in this tradition, and also as inheritors of the community activism that lay behind the British Library’s National Life Stories Collection, where our interviews will housed.

As academics, we have the privilege of being the first users of the archive that we are generating and this brings us to our research aims. As we write, we are only a third of the way through the project. However we can already identify elements of our interviewees’ stories which laid the ground for that expanded conception of citizenship which FEMCIT used to define its research questions, and its overall question of the influence of women’s movements. In a sense the oral histories show the raw and emotional birth of those ideas, and also the living embodiment of their ageing. In the UK, FEMCIT’s six interrelated “dimensions” of citizenship, for example, could be given the faces of Sheila Gilmore, a lawyer supporting women involved in divorce, domestic abuse, child protection and adoption and today MP for Scotland, Mary Kelly, pioneering conceptual artist on mothering, Stella Dadzie, inspiration behind the Organisation for Women of African and Asian Descent, Karen McMinn, long time lynchpin of Women’s Aid Northern Ireland, Jan McKenley, of the National Abortion Campaign and Mary McIntosh, progenitor of the YBA wife campaign for women’s financial and legal independence and the Gay Liberation Front in Britain. The

memories and opinions of such women enables us to trace a new cultural history of movement identity and organisation, and to draw out the crossovers between groups often said to be distinct, whether ideologically or because of majority-minority community and national locale.

To say this, however, immediately reveals one of the primary challenges, if not flaws, in our project design, which is the conundrum of how individuals can represent a necessarily collective political process. How can we justify this intellectually and in terms of honouring a movement which prided itself on its refusal of stars? Polly Russell elaborates the rationale for our method, and Rachel Cohen and Margaretta Jolly address two related questions about how these deeply singular histories reflect much broader patterns of movement diversity and location, while grappling with how we have tried to anticipate this in our selection criteria, our interview method and outputs.

But we admit that in many ways our oral history restages the challenges that feminists themselves brought to the table in wanting to take the experiential and the personal into account. We cannot solve the ethical difficulties this brings, which include a disproportionate focus on particular individuals and invested rather than tested knowledge; and conversely, of a potentially overly psychological approach to analysis. Further, our project is not designed to be able to assess wider political influence directly, as Margaretta Jolly's closing piece explains. Rather what we are doing is to document, understand and assess a movement's early shape and spirit, and how its own inventors perceive its influence over time, including in their own lives. This is a different proposition – smaller perhaps than FEMCIT, but valuable in its own way, for a feminist past will always be important to the realisation of its future.

In what follows, researchers from the FEMCIT and Sisterhood and After projects address, in paired papers, the four questions that we have identified as particularly salient in our shared project of researching women's movements: methods and research design (Sasha Roseneil and Polly Russell), difference and diversity (madeleine kennedy-macfoy and Rachel Cohen), place, space and nation (Line Nyhagen Predelli and Margaretta Jolly), and understanding impact (Joyce Outshoorn and Margaretta Jolly).

¹ This special cluster of papers is the product of a colloquium "Researching Women's Movements: Four Troubling Questions" (19 November 2010) that brought together researchers involved in FEMCIT and Sisterhood and After, along with other women's movement researchers. We thank Polly Russell and the British Library for hosting this event, and all who took part in the lively discussions that day.

² FEMCIT was an FP 6 Integrated Project (Project No. 028746) that ran from 2007-2011. It involved 9 university partners, and, at its largest, 50 researchers. The "project office" was Beatrice Halsaa, Solveig Bergman Sasha Roseneil, and Tone Hellesund (2006-8), and Sevil Sumer (2009-11). See www.femcit.org, the FEMCIT Final Report (Halsaa, Roseneil and Sumer, 2011) and Halsaa, Roseneil and Sumer (2012).

³ In all we carried out research in 13 countries: Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Finland, France, FYR Macedonia, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and the UK. With the benefit of hindsight, the project might have been better designed had the partners been brought together with regard to their national expertise and linguistic competence, in order to produce a systematically comparative project using the same countries across all the work packages. Researchers live and learn!

⁴ See http://www.femcit.org/files/femcit_manifesto.pdf [accessed 6 June 2011]

⁵ For more information, see www.sussex.ac.uk/clhlwr/sisterhoodandafter and <http://www.londonmet.ac.uk/thewomenslibrary/aboutthecollections/research/wlmnetwork.cfm>

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